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## **Drought has given one woman a new mission in life**

By Diana Marcum

Reporting from East Porterville, Calif.

The grandmother sat outside in her Sunday best next to a house with peeling paint, her canned iced tea resting on top of a washing machine that didn't work. She'd been without running water for four months.

Up an easy-to-miss dirt road, a 70-year-old woman moved 5-gallon jugs of water into her single-wide trailer. It was hard because she was weak from chemotherapy. Her water had stopped coming out of the tap three months ago.

At the elementary school, a kitchen worker talked about all the children who were coming to school dirty.

This scattered Tulare County community may be the hardest-hit place in California's punishing drought. Of its 7,300 people, almost 1,000 have no running water.

But few knew that until Donna Johnson, 72, started counting.

During a week when the temperature reached 106, Johnson drove her purple PT Cruiser past "Beware of dog" signs and up side roads that looked long-deserted. She found mobile homes hidden behind other buildings. She said to her newfound neighbors, "Hi. Do you have water?"

Again and again, the answer was no.

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When Johnson's well ran dry in June, she and her husband, Howard, had no idea they were part of something bigger.

"I'd heard 'California drought!' on the news," she said. "But I guess I was just oblivious to how bad it had gotten."

At the local gas station where everyone stops for a cold soda, Johnson tuned in to the conversations.

"It was all, 'So-and-so's well ran dry,' " she said.

No public agency was keeping track. Until this week, California was the only Western state that didn't regulate groundwater, including an estimated 600,000 private, domestic wells mostly in more rural regions such as the Central Valley. Groundwater levels here have plunged by 60 feet

or more in some spots, and tens of thousands of wells are in danger.

In July, Johnson decided to put together a list of people out of water in East Porterville. She figured that while she was at it, she should bring them water.

The Porterville Recorder ran an article that gave her phone number and address and said she was collecting bottled water for drought victims. The next day there were pallets of plastic bottles under her tarp carport.

Johnson deputized Matt Rogers, a 19-year-old former neighbor, as her righthand man to make the deliveries. The calls from people needing water came as quickly as the donated bottles.

“Families would call at midnight and say, ‘We’re completely out of water,’ and we’d go take them some,” Rogers said. “I’d tell them it was a lot of work for a 72-year-old woman, but Donna got mad and told me to stop telling people her age.”

Still, the growing numbers and nonstop deliveries were taking a toll.

“I’d come home at night and cry,” Johnson said. “I thought ‘What are these people supposed to do?’ They could be dying for lack of water and just get brushed under the carpet.”

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For months, scores of people had called the county, the next-door city of Porterville and the local water district to report dry wells. The answer was always the same: This agency isn’t responsible for wells on private property.

But officials hadn’t realized how many people were desperate.

Last month, volunteers, firefighters and county workers delivered a three-week emergency supply of drinking water to 300 homes.

In front of an East Porterville fire station, a storage tank was filled with water from a city hydrant that residents could use for bathing and flushing toilets. Signs warned in English and Spanish: “Do not use this water for drinking.”

Nonprofit agencies began coordinating donations, grants and deliveries. Johnson was no longer a solo force. But she didn’t stop her daily water runs.

“They’re working their bejesus off at County Emergency Services,” Johnson said. “But you’ve got to understand a place like East Porterville. Not everyone is going to fill out paperwork, and some people are hard to find.”